

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

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A Model for Revitalizing LI Towns

For years, too many town and village boards have been clearing the way for too many tacky strip malls. Together, commercial and residential construction have been eating up too many acres of undeveloped Long Island land.

As open space dwindles, it's becoming increasingly difficult to harmonize two crucial goals: preserving land and building houses and apartments that working families can afford. So the time has come to move more seriously to redevelop existing strip malls and to revitalize downtowns — including affordable apartments above stores. An attractive plan for Route 25A in Setauket could become a shining model for that movement.

This plan focuses on three nondescript adjoining shopping centers on the south side of Route 25A. It would give them not only an appealing new face, consistent with the historic Three Village area, but an expanded purpose: apartments above stores, with a mix of prices broad enough to make room for young families and seniors. On the north side of 25A, the plan envisions a park that could serve as a community center for this downtown.

The earliest roots of the idea lie in the Three Village Hamlet Study, completed in 1997. A committee of local citizens put it together, with help from the Town of Brookhaven. The document studied the area's past, examined its present and envisioned its future.

Assemb. Steve Englebright (D-Setauket) sponsored the Main Street Project, a planning effort that served as a forerunner of the hamlet

study, and he later supported the hamlet study itself. As a resident and a public official, he was well grounded in the area's issues.

So, Englebright was more than ready when a snowstorm and a canceled flight delivered to him a prize-winning architect, Richardson Robertson III of Los Angeles. Robertson was in New York on business and visiting friends in Setauket, interior designer Susan Lustik and her husband, Boris. The flight cancellation brought together Englebright and Robertson that night. At midnight, Englebright bundled Robertson into his all-weather vehicle and conducted a tour of the area's historic sites and the shopping centers. Later, the architect put together a concept for the revitalization.

Robertson's drawings offer an appealing vision for change. The idea's enthusiasts include Englebright; Lee Koppelman, the region's premier planner and a Setauket resident, and Charles Lefkowitz, who is about to leave office as a member of the town council and also represents merchants in one of the centers. But this project is still in a very early stage.

First, the merchants in the existing centers have to buy into the idea that a revitalization will help their business. So a detailed financial feasibility study is a crucial step. At the same time, proponents of the plan will need to do some serious outreach to the community. The 1997 hamlet study alone does not constitute nearly enough citizen involvement.

Then proponents must win the town's approval. Supervisor John Jay LaValle has

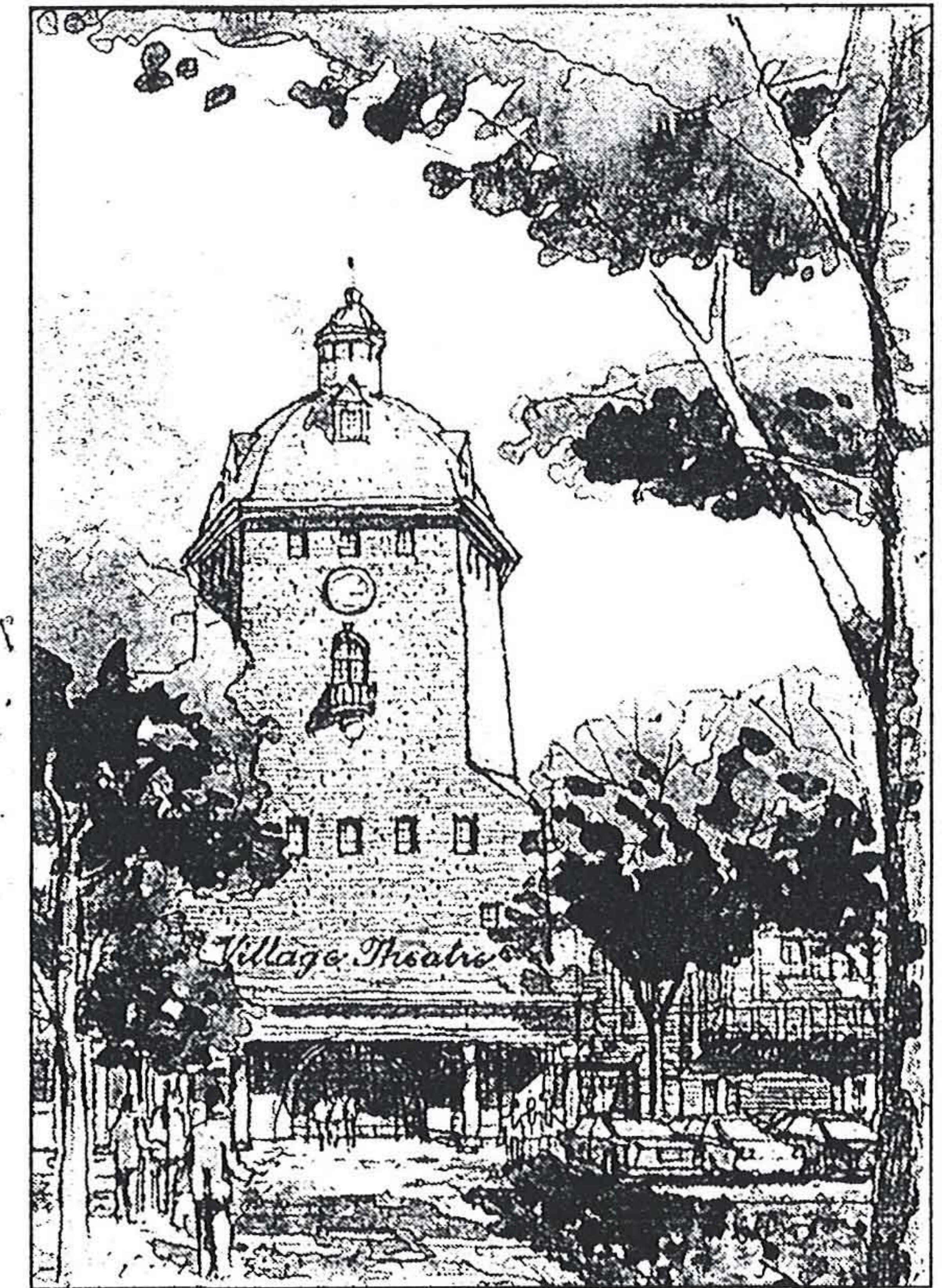


Photo by Robertson Partners Architecture

Part of Setauket Village, as envisioned by planners

taken some key steps toward better planning. Now, guiding to completion a project with this much potential would be a further feather in his cap. A plan like this could provide an attractive, real-life example of what revitalization can do to change the face of Long Island.